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ABSTRACT

The author describes differences in the number and quality of special education programs available in Latin America and suggests directions for improved delivery of special education services. The relatively high level of services provided in Costa Rica are contrasted with the minimal services available in Honduras. The training-based model in which generic educational specialists provide inservice training to teachers is suggested to increase the number of trained personnel. Linkages between ministries of education and teacher training institutions are also encouraged. Latin American activities in special education of organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children, the Partners of the Americas, and the Peace Corps are noted. (DB)

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SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE AMERICAS: CONTRASTS, NEEDS, AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

A study of special education service delivery systems throughout the Americas indicates marked differences in the number and quality of available programs. Replication of successful programs and technical assistance provided by established specialized organizations, supported by advocacy for the handicapped from coalitions of parents, professionals and the handicapped themselves, offer possibilities for effective solutions to the special education needs in Latin America.

The mandate of Public Law (P.L.) 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975) has not been able to guarantee uniformity of service delivery across the United States for education of the handicapped. It is little wonder that throughout Latin America, with high levels of poverty, malnutrition and disability, as well as differential support for education, there is also such a diversity of special education services to meet the needs of handicapped populations.

Wolfensberger's principle of normalization suggests, as a method of human management, "...that in as many aspects of a person's functioning as possible, the human manager will aspire to elicit and maintain behaviors and appearances that come as close to normative as circumstances and the person's limitations permit." This would support efforts currently in effect in the United States toward mainstreaming the mildly handicapped for purposes of social integration.

A movement toward educational mainstreaming, which prompted the passage of P.L. 94-142, and philosophical agreement with the concept of normalization do not happen by accident. They require a commitment to human rights of the handicapped and usually political action to bring them to fruition. Perhaps, under less "democratic" governments than that of the United States (where almost ten years were required), one cannot expect sweeping changes to occur rapidly, but certainly there could and should be a gradual move in that direction. Shared technical assistance is one way of helping that to occur.

Discouraging statistics from the Partners of the Americas indicate that "less than 15% (of the approximately 45-55 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean with significant handicapping conditions such as blindness, deafness, mental retardation, developmental disabilities and crippling conditions)...receive any kind of social or rehabilitative treatment or services." (Dixon, 1978).

During the past five years, beginning with a sabbatical leave in 1977-78, the author has had several opportunities to visit, observe, and participate in teacher-training efforts in Latin America, and to maintain personal contact with educators from that area. Certainly pockets of progress do exist; North Americans cannot claim all the credit for effective special education procedures and programs in this hemisphere. First-hand information gathered in Costa Rica, Honduras and Guatemala over the past five years provides the basis for the statement that there is great contrast among existing programs, at least in those countries in Latin America.

In Costa Rica, with its population of a little over two million, there has been a conscious effort toward integration of the handicapped into mainstreamed educational settings. The inspired leadership of Marlene Rodriguez, director of special education for the Ministry of Public Education, and her dedicated staff, has helped in the development and maintenance of diagnostic centers, integrated classes for the mildly retarded in regular schools, and individualized programs provided by language therapists and physical education teachers for deficit students in regular schools. An exciting example of mainstreaming was a thalidomide child, enrolled in the second grade class at her neighborhood school, following two years at the rehabilitation center in San Jose. In addition, there are a traditional special education center and classes for the mentally retarded throughout the country, but it was interesting to note that the integrated, mainstream programs were already in progress when P.L. 94-142 was just being implemented in the United States. Some of the strengths in special education in Costa Rica are undoubtedly due to the excellent leadership and tremendous government support, evidence of a real commitment

to and advocacy for the handicapped. The teacher-training institutions also work closely with the Ministry to provide appropriate training to meet current needs. Support from the Oregon Partners of the Americas has assisted many of these efforts.

A different picture, unfortunately, is to be seen in Honduras, a country of about three and a half million people, where there are only five small special education facilities serving approximately four hundred children of the entire undetermined handicapped population. The remaining children and youth with special needs are either excluded from school, or are in regular classes, with no provision for teacher training to meet their needs. On an encouraging note, in 1981, eight resource rooms were established throughout the country by the Ministry of Education, in carefully selected schools, to be staffed by experienced first and second grade teachers. It is anticipated that four additional resource rooms will be opened in the coming year.

The five special education schools in Honduras include: a government supported school for about 150 deaf and mentally retarded children, with residential facilities for approximately thirty students, near Tegucigalpa, private schools in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, a school for the blind and a school for early stimulation. All five facilities have hard-working staffs and committed parent groups. For the private schools minimal government support is available in the form of financial assistance. A small number of Peace Corps volunteers began three years ago to work cooperatively with the staffs to provide inservice training, as well as developing links with a teacher-training institution, under the Ministry of Education, to aid in preservice education of regular teachers. There has also been limited technical assistance provided by the Vermont Partners. Much remains to be done in Honduras to expand special education services. With the combined resources and leadership of the existing

schools and representatives of the Ministries of Education, Health, and Work, and the Councils of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation, long-term goals need to be established and effective programs implemented.

Expressed problems in special education throughout Latin America have been attributed to the lack of trained personnel, dearth of special education materials, and the fact that there are not adequate testing materials in Spanish or, where materials are available, they have not been standardized in those cultures. The training-based model, advocated by Lilly (1971) and implemented in Vermont since 1968 (McKenzie, 1972), may provide a possible solution to the need for more trained special educators, even though the educational and social conditions vary considerably. In Vermont, graduate training and employment of generic educational specialists, known as "consulting teacher/learning specialists" has helped provide inservice training to already employed teachers, with the added benefit of the "multiplier effect". The inservice training includes classroom management, individualizing instruction, curriculum objectives systems, principles of reinforcement, and evaluation of teaching/learning procedures, as well as training paraprofessionals and other ancillary personnel. Similar skills are also currently being taught at the University of Vermont to preservice teachers in the undergraduate "Responsive Teacher Program".

Linkages need to be established with teacher-training institutions, nurtured by the ministries of education, to provide more and better training of special educators, using some of the model special education schools and programs as practicum sites for preservice teachers. Resource centers for the storage and dissemination of effective special education materials need to be developed, also in conjunction with the institutions of higher education. The cont.o-

versy in the United States surrounding the value of standardized testing, compounded by the difficulties in attempting to use and adapt North American tests with Latin American children (Alzate, 1978), might cause consideration of curriculum-based assessment as a viable alternative.

Numerous organizations in the private and public sectors in North America work in the international sphere to provide technical assistance and aid in program development and implementation in special education and rehabilitation for our neighbors to the south.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) held the First World Congress on Future Special Education in Stirling, Scotland in 1978, and its international relations committee is currently making plans for future international meetings. Among its other present international activities are development of a system for exchange of materials and publications, a mailing list of international resources, providing technical assistance to people in other countries interested in developing their own special education organizations, in addition to the recent expansion of membership to include people beyond North America.

The Partners of the Americas, a private non-profit organization of fifty partnerships, links forty-four states of the United States with twenty-one countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, to promote technical assistance and self-help activities in education, public health, and agriculture. In addition to the ongoing activities of the partnerships, a recent direction has been taken by the Partners Appropriate Technology for the Handicapped (PATH) program for the development of effective, low-cost, locally available materials and procedures for disability prevention, special education, and rehabilitation. Generous support provided by the IBM/Americas/Far East Corporation aided in the development of five regional resource

centers for these purposes, representing the partnerships of Jamaica and Western New York, Costa Rica and Oregon, Ecuador and Idaho, Uruguay and Minnesota, and Minas Gerais, Brazil and Colorado. The Council for Exceptional Children will serve as a resource for the PATH centers, through CEC's Department of Information Services and ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children.

Education projects sponsored by the Peace Corps in numerous countries throughout the Americas have greatly enhanced limited programs already in effect. The National Association for Retarded Citizens has counterparts in many sections of the world, with shared information disseminated through the international federation. Rotary International, International Reading Association, and Rehabilitation International are among other organizations sharing expertise and financial assistance throughout the Americas and beyond.

Where the need exists for improved special education programs and services, a well-planned strategy must be articulated. Advocacy needs to start at the grass roots level, in the form of a coalition, a movement of "consumers", originally spearheaded by organizations of parents of the handicapped and by professionals, and later augmented by groups formed by the handicapped themselves. The strength of numbers cannot be underestimated. This organized force, advocating and working for the rights of the handicapped, should be able to exert influence on the decision-makers in government for the much-needed financial support which will ultimately benefit society at large.

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